

VZCZCXRO4556
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK
DE RUEHDIR #0058/01 2421436
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P R 301436Z AUG 07
FM IRAN RPO DUBAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0176
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE
RUEHDIR/IRAN RPO DUBAI 0169
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDHP/DIA DHP-1 WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 0160
RUEHAD/AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI 0126

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000058

SIPDIS

NOFORN
SIPDIS

LONDON FOR GAYLE, BERLIN FOR PAETZOLD
BAKU FOR HAUGEN, PARIS FOR WALLER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 8/30/2017
TAGS: [IR](#) [KIRF](#) [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#)
SUBJECT: CATHOLIC NUNS IN IRAN REPORT DIFFICULTIES

RPO DUBAI 00000058 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian Burns, Director, Iran Regional Presence
Office, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(S//NF) Summary: A Catholic nun living in Iran told IRPO said she leads a small group of nuns who do community work and operate under the authority of the Assyrian Church in Iran. The nun said their ability to carry out their duties is severely limited when compared to pre-revolutionary days and that their community center is closely monitored by the Iranian government. She said the nuns have had difficulty obtaining permission and funding to build a new community center outside of Tehran, complaining of government corruption. She requested USG funding to complete the community center, while acknowledging the difficulty of accepting money from foreign sources. End Summary.

2. This is an action request. Please see para 10.

3.(S//NF) A Catholic nun who has lived 33 years in Iran, discussed with IRPOff the situation for her and her fellow sisters in Iran. She said that she came with a small group of Catholic nuns (four Italians and one Brazilian) to Iran in 1974. They chose to operate under the authority of the Assyrian Church, the nun said, because it was poorer and needed more help than the Armenian Church.

Less freedom than before revolution

4.(S//NF) Prior to the 1979 revolution, the nuns ran a boarding school where she said many Iranian elite sent their children, as well as a clinic and orphanage, also open to non-Christians. Following the revolution, however, their school, clinic, and orphanage were closed, and today they are only allowed to run a Christian community center. Furthermore, the community center is off limits to non-Christians. While many foreigners were forced to leave Iran after the revolution (in part, she said, because rations were not available to non-Iranians), the nuns were able to stay because they had acquired Iranian citizenship. (Note: It was not clear whether this is the only group of Catholic nuns in Iran. End note.)

5.(S//NF) The nuns, who currently number 6-8, are permitted to hold a mass at the center every Tuesday, performed by an Assyrian priest. She said they also hold "underground"

workshops in ceramics, computers, and foreign languages, inferring that the workshops are also attended by non-Christians. She said that young people used to come to their workshops more freely in the past. The nun indicated that more recently they have had difficulty attracting people to their classes and said that the organization now has to offer some incentives. (Note: She did not indicate why interest was waning or specify what kind of incentives they offered. End note).

6.(S//NF) The nun commented that the Assyrian Church in Iran today has a fragile structure. The Assyrian bishop in Iran is Iraqi, she said, and without Iranian citizenship he is technically vulnerable to expulsion at any time. She also said the Assyrian church is very patriarchal. As an example of this, she claimed that when Assyrian church officials participate in events relating to interfaith dialogue, they never invite the sisters. She added that the nuns feel that their own situation is fragile despite their Iranian citizenship. For example, she said they were likely to face (unspecified) repercussions if they did not vote in elections, although she did not indicate any pressure to vote for specific candidates. She also mentioned their suspicion that the government monitors their emails and telephone calls.

Christians leaving

7.(S//NF) The nun said, similar to other sources, that there is high rate of emigration of Christians from Iran, although she did not indicate whether the reason was because of specific persecution or general economic or social pressures. She said there is an organization in Austria that helps Christians, as well as Muslims, emigrate from Iran to the US at a cost of \$3000. She estimated the Assyrian community in Iran today to be 15-20,000. She did not give an estimate for the Catholic community, only indicating that it is very small.

RPO DUBAI 00000058 002.2 OF 002

Obstacles to a new center

8.(S//NF) The nuns have been attempting to build a much larger community center just outside of Tehran for the past ten years but have had difficulty obtaining needed permission and funding, the nun said. She detailed the frustrations of dealing with the municipality, which has granted them building permits, but for insufficient time frames to complete the project, and then withheld renewals for months or years. They were also in dispute with the Agriculture ministry, which claimed they were building on land meant for agriculture. The nun bemoaned the corruption of government officials, adding (without details) that "everything depends on the Pasdaran (IRGC)." In addition to their woes in dealing with the government, the nun said that the costs of construction had risen significantly since the government began forcibly expelling illegal Afghan immigrants, who had provided cheap construction labor.

Reason for meeting

9.(S//NF) The nun, whose request to meet a USG official had been passed to IRPO through an Emirati contact of Embassy Abu Dhabi, solicited USG funding to complete the new community center. She said the nuns currently have a valid building permit but lack funds to complete the project. They have reportedly exhausted funding from the Vatican and need approximately 500,000 euros (USD 683,250) to complete the project. IRPOff replied that USG funding for projects of this sort is uncommon, suggesting the nuns seek out Christian charitable organizations in the US and elsewhere, an idea the nun appeared not to have considered. The nun acknowledged the difficulty they would face in bringing in any funding from the US or other countries. She said that funding from the Vatican came through the Vatican's diplomatic pouch, but she doubted that other countries would be able to

bring them funds in a similar manner.

10.(S//NF) Action request: Please advise if the USG wants to try to pursue this request for funding for a Christian community center in Iran in any way. IRPO does not see a direct USG interest in such a project, but the USG could convey the details to relevant religious groups. It is not known whether the Vatican would agree to transfer funds on behalf of another religious organization.

BURNS